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Joseph in the Torah and the Qur'ān: An Assessment of Malik Bennabi's Narrative

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Abstract: Malek Bennabi's *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon* provides an excellent analysis of Qur'ānic revelation through the application of the phenomenology. A closer analysis of the work shows that Bennabi's major contribution is to be found in his narrative strategies and comparative style as evidenced, among others, in chapters 13 and 14 of the *Qur'ānic Phenomenon*. Here Bennabi provides a balanced picture of the story of Joseph in the Torah and the Qur'ān. Bennabi's textual strategy, narrative and meta-narrative brings out the uniqueness of the Qur'ānic account of Joseph. The reconstruction of the story of Joseph opened a new type of discourse in understanding the relationship between religion and modernity.

Keywords: Malik Bennabi, Joseph, Qur'ānic phenomenon, Meta narrative, Textual strategy

Malek Bennabi (1905 – 1973), born in Constantine, is an eminent scholar and thinker of post World War II Algeria and one of the foremost intellectuals of the modern Muslim world. Educated in Paris and Algiers in Engineering, he later based himself in Cairo, writing and lecturing on what he believed to be the grand issues: Qur'ān, science, civilisation, culture and ideas. Of his many works, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon* is certainly the most important work written about the Qur'ān in the 20th century.[1] It provides an excellent analysis of Qur'ānic revelation through the application of the phenomenology as a method of understanding and appreciating the Qur'ānic text. Given the fact that phenomenology as a method was well-established in Islamic studies, Bennabi's claim to his use of phenomenology as

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a new direction or an innovation in Islamic scholarship is unlikely to be accepted. However, the genuine contribution of Bennabi is in both his narrative strategies and comparative style.[2]

This study focuses on chapters 13 and 14 of *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon.* In these two chapters, Bennabi's narrative reached its climax providing a balanced picture of the story of Joseph in both the Torah and the Qur'ān. While the language of difference is not overemphasised, the uniqueness of the Qur'ānic account of the story of Joseph has been well portrayed.[3] This success is largely due to Bennabi's narrative and comparative mode of analysis without compromising his faith or objectivity. This has been explained in this study by paying closer attention to the problem of textual strategies, narrative and meta-narrative.

The Context of the Book

The Qur'ānic Phenomenon was written twice in its original French version. The first form was lost during the Second World War.[4] It has been suggested that the narrative in the first form was perhaps addressed to the Muslim youth who were influenced by the West as well as to non-Muslims who increasingly became part of the debate on religion and modernity. Perhaps, the book was based upon reflections concerning the challenges he faced when, out of necessity, he became a member of the Christian Youth Organisation in Paris and, as narrated in his autobiography, he had learned discussions with the leaders of that organisation.[5] That is how he became familiar with the Judaeo-Christian tradition and modernity and the challenges they posed to Islam.

The second time the book was reorganised, reconstructed and almost rewritten by Bennabi during his stay in Egypt in the late fifties and early sixties. The reconstructed book was translated into Arabic.[6] Although he voiced his dissatisfaction with the present form of the book, the depth of the argument and the religious imagination which are reflected in the text is beyond the reach of an isolated Muslim intellectual in Paris during the 1940s. Thus, his assertion that, "in its present form, it does not satisfy the original idea we formulated concerning the problem of the Qur'ān," should not be taken literally but rather it reflects the new orientation within which the text was written.[7] As he stated, the essence of his original text

was to establish "an analytical method for the study of the Qur'ānic phenomenon."[8] He explained that the major objective of his work was to furnish Muslim youth with new theoretical orientation in understanding religion as well as to suggest a methodological reform in Qur'ānic exegesis that would redefine the meaning of *iʿjāz* (inimitability of the Qur'ān).[9]

From the introduction to the book, it is clear that Bennabi was familiar with Taha Hussain's famous book on pre-Islamic Arabic poetry *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* and the debate it instigated in Egypt's intellectual milieu.[10] Taha Hussein applied the Cartesian method of doubt on the subject and created intellectual havoc in the Arab world. Bennabi made a direct reference to Taha's book and provided a learned rather than a sensational response.[11] He adroitly redirected the discussion into becoming a real challenge to modernity and opened a new discourse in the study of the religious phenomenon.

It is possible to discern a relationship between Bennabi's understanding of the problem of *iʿjāz* and its wider context of Qur'ānic exegesis and his intellectual engagement on the issue of pre-Islamic poetry. The narrative in the introduction to the book was adjusted to include both the content and implication of the issue on his major thesis on the Qur'ānic phenomenon. It is worth noting as well that in Paris the issue was to convince both non-Muslims and Muslims of the relevance of the Qur'ān to the religious phenomenon. In Cairo, the Muslim audience was of two types: the elite with "a mind of Cartesian bent" and the laymen who espoused popular ideas.[12] This is because Bennabi's theory of social change identified two separate levels: intellectual and popular. In his view, any learned discussion geared towards formulating a new method of understanding *iʿjāz* and suggesting a modification in the system of Qur'ānic exegesis had to keep in mind the sensibilities of these two levels; otherwise its message would not filter and penetrate all the layers of the social fabric.[13]

Accordingly, he tried at a stroke to redefine the meaning of *iʿjāz* and modify the system of Qur'ānic exegesis by utilising the issue of pre-Islamic poetry. Admittedly, the connection between pre-Islamic poetry and Cartesian method is highly visible. But Bennabi's narrative suggested that the deep meaning of the issue is much less about pre-Islamic poetry than about the challenge of modernity that

had to be addressed by a new approach and a set of strategies for social change. The Egyptian context was far more complex than the French one with regard to this issue.

Though Bennabi would make us believe that the original idea of his book was retained with less sophistication and, perhaps, with lack of documentation, the most significant development in the present form of his text is that it reflected the depth of the intellectual crisis in Egypt at that time. His real contribution was both to the understanding of that crisis and to suggest a learned methodological reform in Qur'ānic exegesis that required a new set of tools. It can be argued that the present form of the book might fit neatly into the previous analysis compared with the French form which was published in Algiers, but certainly the lost text which was in French was considered by Bennabi as far more complex and represented the original idea.

Whatever the case, one would always see the fact that the present form of the text reflected the complexities of Islam and modernity in Egypt and the Muslim world. Most important, perhaps, the battleground for such an intellectual endeavour was neither Paris nor Algeria during that era. Although the literary theory of *iʿjāz* was already out on a limb compared to the new position suggested by Bennabi, Sayyid Qutb developed a new literary approach that was gaining momentum among Muslim intellectuals.[14] However, Bennabi's approach was more fundamental in its response to the basic postulates of modernity.

Distinctive Features of the Comparison

As stated, this study focuses mainly on the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of Bennabi's work. After justifying the selection of Sūrah Yūsuf in the Qur'ān and the chapter of Joseph in the Torah, Bennabi outlines the scope of comparison in the two accounts, the main parallels and the textual strategies he would follow. He tried to juxtapose the Qur'ānic and the Biblical world in such a way that the story of Joseph would serve as a prototype narrative. It should be noted that the Qur'ānic style of narrative, unlike the Biblical one, had only the story of Joseph as a beginning-to-end narrative in one place. The rest of the shared Biblical and Qur'ānic stories were retold in the Qur'ān in different places whenever the context of the sūrah

(chapter) requires the details of the story to be included, thematic aspect to be played down and the relevant parallel stories to be added to the overall narrative.

Still, either the story of Ibrāhīm (Abraham) or Mūsā (Moses) could have been chosen for this comparison, but none of them would satisfy the criterion of beginning-to-end narrative. Although the Qur'ān narrated the story of both Abraham and Moses in detail, their stories are not found in one sūrah. Thus, their stories would disturb the very idea of a comparison between beginning-to-end narratives. Admittedly, the choice of the story of Yūsuf is a learned one. It served the purpose of comparison and helped in developing Bennabi's argument to its logical conclusion.

Structure of the Narrative

Bennabi tried to put together, in a comparative style, the story of Yūsuf in the Qur'ān and the chapter on Joseph in the Torah. It was his prerogative to decide where to start the story of Joseph in the Torah as it essentially formed a part of the story of Jacob. Thus, he decided to start it with Genesis 37:2. Bennabi could have made Genesis 30:22 (which reads, "Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb"), 30:23 ("And she conceived and bore a son, and said 'God has taken away my reproach") and 30:24 ("So, she called his name Joseph") as the beginning of the narrative instead of Genesis 37:2, which reads, "This is the history of Jacob, Joseph being seventeen." Nevertheless, a careful reading of this beginning of the story in the Bible and its Qur'ānic counterpart shows that both narratives started at more or less that point of time in Joseph's life. While Bennabi decided to make the beginning of the *sūrah* as the beginning of the Qur'ānic starting point of the narrative, it seemed that the real beginning of Joseph's narrative in the Torah was within the family of Jacob when he became seventeen. Anything before that was about Jacob's family. The Qur'ānic beginning was much more a cosmic beginning rather than a family affair. While the Biblical narrative over-emphasised the particular human predicament, its Qur'ānic counterpart underlined the cosmic and universal setting of the story.

Although Bennabi made the beginning of *Sūrah Yūsuf* the beginning of his narrative for the comparison, he chose verse 2:101,

instead of the last verse 12:111 of the sūrah, as the natural end of Yūsuf's narrative, omitting the last nine Qur'ānic verses from the comparison. This can be justified on the ground that the last nine verses are not directly relevant to the story of Yūsuf. The beginning of the sūrah was included for both its relevance and its cosmic setting that befitted the theme of the Qur'ānic narrative, the closing verses of the *sūrah* were excluded for their relevance to the Muslim situation i.e. being relevant to something other than themselves. As far as the Biblical version of the story is concerned, Bennabi decided to end the story with Genesis 47:1, which reads "Then Joseph went and told Pharaoh, and said, "My father and my brothers," which is quite parallel to the Qur'ānic ending.

In relation to the events, the Qur'ānic ending came immediately after Yūsuf's comment on the realisation of his dream. The Qur'ān recounts it as follows:

> O my Sustainer, You have indeed bestowed upon me something of power, and have taught me some knowledge of the inner meaning of happenings – the Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my *Wali* (Protector, Guardian) in this world and in the Hereafter: let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You and join with the righteous (*Sūrah Yūsuf,* 12:101).

By contrast, the Biblical ending at the same point in the sequence of events trickled and continued into minute details that are highly unlikely to be part of the story of Joseph.

It seems that Bennabi's decision to select a viable structure for the two narratives was largely based on his understanding of the centrality of Joseph's dream, as if the real beginning of the narrative was the dream and the end of the story was the realisation of that dream. With this criterion Bennabis's choice determined where to make the boundaries of the beginning-end-narrative in each version. Perhaps, one could suggest that the natural setting of each version will equally justify the starting point and the relevant end. While the family is the main setting for the Biblical narrative – and it is important here to follow Bennabi's selection which reflected that dimension – the Qur'ānic account painted a cosmic and universal meaning for the story which led Bennabi to follow that direction. It should be noted that both versions had a more or less parallel structure that

included similar sets of events and also that Bennabi's choice of the structure of the comparison was determined by both a textual strategy and an in-depth understanding of the scope of the two versions of the story. Thus, the denouement of the Qur'ānic version befits the central character.

The Content of the Narrative

Chapter fourteen of Bennabi's book is devoted to an analysis based on a detailed comparison of an interpretation of the content of the two versions. Though Bennabi decided to make the Qur'ānic version the focal point of his comparison, considerable attention was paid to the basic structure and the details of the Biblical narrative. Rather than being a creation of a design where the Biblical version will be at a disadvantage compared to the Qur'ānic one, it followed a textual strategy that tends to make the comparison more focused and meaningful.

In making the Qur'ānic narrative the yardstick of his comparison, Bennabi outlined the series of events within the two narratives. The decision to divide the Qur'ānic narrative into thirty sub-divisions clearly reflected that essential understanding of what should constitute the main plot and how it developed into a fully-fledged narrative. These sub-divisions varied in length and contained one to ten Qur'ānic verses. These sub-divisions, though separate, are related units. However, the general line of the narrative was not broken and the whole structure of the comparison seemed to follow an undeclared system. Out of the eleven sections in Genesis, Bennabi chose only eight, for the comparison in chapter thirteen of his book. He found only section 38 to be irrelevant for comparison. Thus, the total number of Biblical verses which were used directly or indirectly in the comparison is 337, while the number of Qur'ānic verses is 101. This underscores the complexity of the design for comparison. It also shows how Bennabi managed to work out a set of meaningful contrasts without bias. Evidently, this process of comparison is essentially based on an inter-subjective sensibility that will ultimately be appreciated by those who adhere either to the Qur'ānic or Biblical tradition.

In working out a set of criteria for comparison, Bennabi used phrases like "difference," "absent," "variance," "same" and "similar

account." Although he did not define the meaning of each term, a cursory look into them within the context of the comparison would clarify both the meaning and function of these terms. The structure of the comparison seemed to be simple and concise. He referred the readers in the Table of Comparisons to the number of Qur'ānic verses, summarised these verses as well as the relevant Biblical ones if any, and then commented on that specific subdivision of the Qur'ānic verses. This type of textual strategy helped Bennabi to reorganise the Qur'ānic narrative into a design that took into account the Biblical version.

Bennabi's Table of Comparisons shows that out of thirty Qur'ānic subdivisions used in the comparison, the term "difference" appeared in the section of remarks ten times, whereas in the section of the Biblical version the term "absent" appeared fourteen times. Only twice terms like "same" or "similar account" appeared in the section of Biblical version, while terms like "variance" or "with some variation" appeared in the same section. The rest of the Qur'ānic sub-divisions consisted of verse number 54 and verses 63 to 67. In the latter sub-division, it seems that Bennabi did not want to admit the apparent similarity, whereas in the former he was less inclined to emphasise the difference. Though this apparatus of comparison showed the enormity of the difference between the two versions of the story, the possibility of a shared structure was equally highlighted. Therefore, this design of comparison emphasised the difference between the two versions within a matrix of a shared structure.

In addition to the Table of Comparisons in chapter fourteen, Bennabi pointed to the main similarity between the two versions. He said, "The plot of the story is the same, in both versions."[15] But he cautioned the readers against overemphasising this apparent similarity; "However, even a cursory examination will reveal certain special elements that characterise each version."[16] Immediately after this indication of both similarity and peculiar elements within that general plot, Bennabi highlighted the major differences between the two accounts in order to emphasise the Divine origin of the Qur'ānic text and its compatibility with historical facts. For him, the Qur'ānic account "breathes throughout with an unmistakable spirituality that one can feel in the words and acts of the personages depicted in the Qur'ānic scene."[17]

With an insightful analysis of the main Qur'ānic characters in the story of Yūsuf, Bennabi singled out the significant difference between the two versions of the story. In the Qur'ānic account, both Jacob and Joseph spoke and behaved like prophets, the Biblical version played down this crucial dimension of their characters. Even Potiphar's wife in the Qur'ānic narrative behaved in a way that was more plausible and essentially consistent with the spiritual atmosphere generated by the sequence of events. As Bennabi stated, "Potiphar's wife herself speaks in a language befitting a human conscience won over by repentance and vanquished by the innocence and integrity of a victim: the sinner finally confesses her guilt and makes her *men culpa*."[18]

Bennabi, through comparison, highlighted the element of spirituality in the Qur'ānic narrative and pointed out the glaring historical errors in the Biblical version. In his opinion, "the Biblical version exhibits some anachronisms, which rather confirm the apocryphal character of the passage in question."[19] Furthermore, the Biblical version was fond of minute and rather insignificant details to create a narrative that dotted all "i"s and crossed all "t"s. By contrast, the Qur'ānic version was more focused on the central character, Joseph. Despite differences between the two versions, Bennabi's main preoccupation was with the striking similarities between the Qur'ānic and the Biblical traditions. In the table of comparison, despite the prevalence of the language of difference, Bennabi followed the main textual strategy of retaining the Qur'ānic uniqueness within the wider context of monotheism. That monotheistic context had different historical manifestations of which both the Qur'ān and the Bible were particular versions.

This suggests the importance of understanding the similarities between the two versions not as an example of mere borrowing, but as separate and different manifestations of one and the same origin. This way of making sense of the differences and similarities imparted an understanding of monotheistic traditions on a different plane. It has completely trivialised the influence of theories advocated by many European orientalists. Evidently, it has substituted the sheer and naïve recourse to borrowing theories with an in-depth analysis of the content of the narrative within a context that keeps us well informed about historical and psychological facts. As a result, his

line of analysis opened a new realm of possibilities that have more explanatory power.

Working with the issues of similarities and differences that cut across notions of borrowings, uniqueness and inter-textual relationships, Bennabi decided to transcend all of them. Thus, he proposed an original source of which both the Qur'ānic and Biblical accounts are particular manifestations. This position might seem to be rather problematic for those who champion positivism and tend to eliminate any metaphysical assumptions. But Bennabi completely disassociated any metaphysical dimension from his proposal of the possibility of original source.

In a Cartesian discourse, this possibility seems to be more plausible and within the realm of what could be perceived clearly and distinctly. For Bennabi, since the Biblical narrative of the story suffers from glaring inconsistencies with historical facts, it must cede to an original source. This is because these historical mistakes are largely due to projections by scribes who, owing to their experience of slavery in Egypt, imposed the dichotomy of Hebrews versus Egyptians upon the narrative. Such dichotomy did not exist during the time of Joseph. During that era, a donkey could not have been part of the domesticated animals of the Children of Israel. Even worse, it is inconceivable to have been used by the sons of Jacob for crossing the desert from Palestine to Egypt. It is, therefore, the work of careless scribes who would like to read everything from their limited perspective. Making this remark as clear as it should be in his analysis of the Biblical narrative, Bennabi's postulate of an original source seems to be plausible that a Cartesian mind should not reject.[20]

In his analysis of the two versions of the story, there is an unmistakable determination to sell this postulate of an original source to those with "a mind of a Cartesian bent."[21] Nothing, however trivial or insignificant, is left unutilised in this endeavour. Moreover, one has to admit that Bennabi's main focus in the comparison was not on these details, but on the main theme of scriptures. This essence is repeatedly captured in his emphasis on spirituality in the characters of Jacob, Joseph and the wife of Potiphar. Undoubtedly, the absence of this theme in the Biblical narrative renders it more reflective of the perspective of the scribe who was increasingly locked into the

history of Jacob's family rather than establishing a cosmic or a universally guided narrative.

It is possible to categorise an argument that is essentially based on similarities and differences as speculative in nature. However, the main content in Bennabi's analysis is much less about similarities and differences than about how to make sense of them. Therefore, the real value of his discourse on similarities and differences is much more about the new possibilities of seeing the relationship between the Qur'ānic account and the Biblical one within a wider monotheistic tradition. It will always remain beside the point when a question of subjectivity is levelled against his narrative in order to demolish its logical value. However, his narrative is extremely useful in organising and understanding the relationship between these two versions of the same story. Furthermore, it will help us to transcend the hubris of borrowing theories and opens new sensibilities of understanding the relationship between the Qur'ān and the Bible. Though the similarities and differences are not altogether given facts, what we make of them is equally not completely speculative in nature. If it has been given any importance in the discourse, the minimisation of speculation will basically depend upon the plausibility of the narrative and its explanatory power.[22]

Apparently, in comparing the two scriptures, Bennabi assumed that he would be able to identify the story of Joseph in both the Qur'ān and the Bible. Even though there is such a thing as "the story of Joseph," the identification of its boundaries is extremely difficult. It becomes even more difficult when this identification is meant for creating a parallel structure in the two scriptures. Certainly, the criteria that make the story of Joseph as one narrative in the Qur'ān are not the same as those that mark the boundaries of the same story in the Bible. It is because of this problem that Bennabi decided to make the content of the story of Joseph centre around the realisation of the dream. This identification of the essence of the story allowed him to transform the structure of the beginning-to-end narrative into an end-to-end narrative. It made the story to start with the dream and to finish with the realisation of that dream as a final act. This cycle of narrative might seem to be a meaningful structure and has its justification in the Qur'ānic narrative, where the story started with the dream and the sequence of events which

culminated in its realisation.

Accordingly, working out a parallel structure from the Biblical narrative was part of a systematic design. This made the process of identification of the boundaries of the story within each tradition to be based on a cycle of events that strictly followed the narration of the dream and ended with its realisation. It redefined the meaning of end-to-end narrative within a realm that equally redefined the relationship between the seen and the unseen. Although this arrangement of the story might seem to be convenient, it certainly captured the essence of the human drama in relation to the Absolute, in which the seemingly beginning-to-end narrative was turned into an end-to-end narrative.

The Place of the Qurānic Phenomenon in the History of Revelation

Bennabi argued that, owing to specific historical and cultural developments in the Muslim world, the issue of *iʿjāz* could not be looked at solely from a linguistic perspective. This necessitated both a new formulation of the problem and a new approach to the issue of *iʿjāz.* Time and again, he pointed out that these considerations "cannot be separated from the general history of the prophetic movement and Divine religions."[23] He explained the details of his methodological stand as follows:

> In other words, we shall link the particular case of Islam to the religious phenomenon in general. The Qur'ān's aim is to place its messenger as the ultimate link in the chain of prophetic movement and to place the teachings of the Qur'ān as the culmination of the stream of monotheistic thought.[24]

This methodological strategy meant, among other things, that the location of both the messenger and the message within the history of revelation and the prophetic movement. It started with the assumption that the contemporary Arabs lost the natural disposition of linguistic taste. Even worse, the technical meaning of *iʿjāz,* which is essentially based on the acquired faculty of discerning what is aesthetically excellent from its opposite, did not form part of the main stream of the educational system. It was rather the monopoly of a very few. In such a situation, Bennabi felt the urgent need for a reformulation of the question that takes into account the development of the meaning of *iʿjāz* from a simple lexical meaning to a technical

one; a reformulation that should take into account the historical dimension. Where the simple and direct way of interacting with the message of the Qur'ān was the gift of eloquence which was part of the Arab's natural disposition, later, during the Abbasid era, this superb taste of eloquence was turned into a craft. Thus, as Bennabi pointed out, the interaction of both ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and al-Walīd Ibn al-Mughīrah belong to the first category, whereas al-Jāḥiẓ and al-Jurjānī's accounts belong to the second one. Now, Bennabi argued that nothing of the position of the previous two categories could be maintained with the same meaningfulness.

It is because of this state of affairs, and for which he took the trouble to analyse the historical development that led to this situation, that a new method and understanding of the problem of *iʿjāz* needed to be developed. One possible way was to look into the Qur'ān for a better understanding of the meaning of *iʿjāz.* According to Bennabi, one meaning of *iʿjāz* that seemed to be of a universal value and not limited to the subjective taste of eloquence is the historical type of *iʿjāz.* In this connection, he mentioned the following ḥadīth:

> Every Prophet was given miracles because of which people believe, but what I have been given is Divine Inspiration (waḥy), which God has revealed to me. So I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of other Prophets on the Day of Resurrection.[25]

In the light of this Prophetic tradition, Bennabi felt the "… need to conceive the meaning of *iʿjāz* in relation to its meaning in the monotheistic religions as a whole."[26] Additionally, he felt that he found a clue to solving the problem of *iʿjāz* in the following Qur'ānic verse (*Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:9):

> Say: "I am not the first of [God's] apostles; and [like all of them], I do not know what will be done with me or with you: I only follow that which is revealed to me, and I am but a plain Warner.[27]

Based on this verse, Bennabi argued:

> Considering this verse as a proof (*ḥujjah*) furnished by the Qur'ān for the Prophet to use in his argument with the polytheists, we can reflect on its logical content from two different angles.[28]

Accordingly, he suggested that the significance of this Qur'ānic verse lies in two important things: (1) It implicitly established the principle that the repetition of the phenomenon under certain circumstances confirms its truth; (2) It established the existence of the clear relationship between the messengers and the messages throughout the ages, and that the message of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) is but one of those messages. Thus, it must be governed by the same criteria. This will obviously establish a dialectical relationship between this message and the rest: it can serve as a tool to verify their truthfulness and vice versa. Then, Bennabi went on to explain the implication of his interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse on the meaning of *iʿjāz*,

> This would suggest that if we look at an event in terms of its repeated occurrence, that is, as a phenomenon, *iʿjāz* would constitute: 1. for the Prophet, the proof (*ḥujjah*)… 2. for religion one of the means for its conveyance and communication (*tablīgh*).[29]

Accordingly, these two characteristics of *iʿjāz* point to the following dimensions: (1) that the proof furnished by *iʿjāz* must be comprehensible to everybody, (2) that the propagation of religion through *iʿjāz* must be beyond the power of everyone, and (3) that the impact of *iʿjāz* must be relevant with regard to time and history. The third aspect is illustrated by Bennabi based on an analysis of the element of *iʿjāz* in both Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, he was at his best in working out the implications of his method in studying monotheistic religions from a comparative perspective. Though his focus was on the issue of *iʿjāz*, the line of argument and the depth of analysis could be extended to other issues of comparison.[30]

It is evident that Bennabi made a strong case for the new understanding of *iʿjāz*. Most important, the discussion of the religious phenomenon was made part and parcel of any serious scientific inquiry. The validity of a religious claim was no longer based upon a subjective act of belief, but it was supported by a historical analysis of the phenomenon. Likewise, he turned the metaphysical issue of belief into a subject of historical investigation. In the case of the Qur'ānic phenomenon, the emphasis is much less on the subjective taste of language than on an elaborate analysis of the history of monotheism that requires a deep understanding of Biblical

archaeology, the languages of scriptures and a rigorous sense of history.[31]

Textual Strategies, Meta-narrative and Modernity

Bennabi followed a strict textual strategy based primarily on a Cartesian mode of organising his book. The principle of clarity and distinctiveness was crucial for organising the chapters of the book and for its line of argument. Accordingly, the book was divided into three main parts. Part one focused on general philosophical and methodological issues, parts two and three were concerned with the Messenger of Islam (Muḥammad, SAW) and the Message of Islam (the Qur'ān) respectively. The design behind this arrangement was to establish a system based on a set of principles constituting its main postulates. Following the Cartesian method of analysis, Bennabi started with the claim that man is a religious being or a *homo religiosus*.[32] This led him to view positivism as a competing system based on the rejection of metaphysics.

For Bennabi, the religious phenomenon could not be explained meaningfully by materialism. The only viable way to study the Prophetic movement was to apply a metaphysical system. From the Biblical Prophets, Jeremiah furnished Bennabi with all the characteristics of Prophethood upon which a comparison with Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) would be both meaningful and convenient. In doing so, Bennabi situated Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) within the Prophetic movement and his message within the history of Revelation. Thus, the logical sequence of both the chapters of the book and the line of argument followed the Cartesian principle of clarity and distinctiveness as a matter of both methodological and historical choice.

Admittedly, the choice between "the physical system" and "the metaphysical system" was determined by the nature of the religious phenomenon itself. It seemed that the choice of Prophet Jeremiah was likely to have been determined by the nature of comparison. Both Bennabi's methodic and historical choices followed a logical sequence that most likely is in line with the Cartesian mode of analysis. However, the culmination of his comparative style reached its climax in the comparative treatment of the story of Joseph. Apparently, the choice of the story of Joseph was guided by the Cartesian principle

mentioned above. It could be argued that the textual strategy followed by Bennabi reflected both a deep understanding of the Cartesian principle and the challenge of modernity to the religious phenomenon in general.

His textual strategy culminated in the comparison of the story of Joseph in the Biblical with the Qur'ānic versions. As already indicated, this generated a narrative based upon an end-to-end structure of the story. The originality of Bennabi, it should be noted, was less in choosing the story of Joseph than in reconstructing the story in a comparative table. Likewise, the narrative was utilised to reconstruct a structure of events within a comparative apparatus that made meta-narrative possible. In this regard, the meta-narrative dealt with the set of possibilities that were opened by Bennabi's narrative of the two versions in a comparative mode. Evidently, the main question of the meta-narrative was: How did the story of Joseph find its way into the Qur'ān?

It should be remembered that Bennabi's analysis of the story of Joseph led him to formulate two different hypotheses in order to explain the similarities between the two versions. The first hypothesis focused on an unconscious assimilation of the Biblical narrative and subsequent reproduction thereof in the Qur'ānic account, while the second hypothesis did not shy away from directly accusing the Prophet of educating himself in the Biblical tradition and then composing the Qur'ānic narrative on the issue. Bennabi stated that to solve this problem one needed to examine these hypotheses "from both psychological and historical viewpoints."[33] In doing so, he reminded us to utilise his analysis concerning Muḥammad's self and its conclusion in part two of his study.[34]

In his examination of the first hypothesis, he concluded that "nothing, therefore, is more improbable than the existence of monotheistic influence in the *Jāhilī* culture, due to the lack of written Judeao-Christian sources."[35] With regard to the second hypothesis, he suggested that,

> [I]t could have two psychological meanings: 1. Muḥammad could have taught himself systemically in order to consciously compile the Qur'ān. 2. He could have inquired about the information or could have been taught it and could have unconsciously used the materials thus at his disposal.[36]

The quotation of this passage is intended to underscore the fact that Bennabi fully utilised the Cartesian mode of analysis in his meta-narrative of the comparison. Just as he did in his examination of the first hypothesis, he skilfully used the conclusions of historical research done in this area to eliminate the possibility of such claims carried by this hypothesis. He maintained, "Hence, we are compelled to conclude that the established similarities are attributed neither to a Judeao-Christian influence spread in the *Jāhilī* milieu, nor to a personal, conscious or unconscious training of Muḥammad."[37]

After a thorough analysis of the different possibilities that might explain the similarities between the Biblical and the Qur'ānic versions of the story of Joseph, Bennabi looked into the story of Moses and the Pharaoh in the light of archeological discoveries. Then, he extended his comparison to both the issue of the flood and the crucifixion of Jesus. In all this, Bennabi succeeded to demonstrate that the possibilities of the two hypotheses under investigation are untenable. By this process of eliminating all historical possibilities that would serve to explain the similarities, Bennabi again asserted the religious account, based on the understanding of the phenomenon of revelation, to be highly probable as a mode of explanation. In a rather cynical tone, he commented,

> Considering the manifest differences between the Qur'ān and the Bible on numerous points concerning the chronology of monotheism, it should be admitted, however, that the Qur'ān would have been inspired by one or many Biblical versions which no longer exist. And finally, it would be necessary to admit that the Prophet must have worked very hard, like an erudite scholar, examining a number of documents, mediating on them and coordinating them, in order to extract from them the Qur'ānic verses.[38]

In Bennabi's analysis, a fair-minded person cannot accept any of these solutions. Accordingly, it seemed the only possible alternative would be the one that is anchored in the tradition of the Prophetic movement and the history of Revelation.

Consequently, Bennabi's mastery of the Cartesian mode of analysis led him to counter-argue the position of modernity. The irony in what he achieved is that modernists used the Cartesian method to undermine religious claims, whereas Bennabi utilised the same

method to show how irrational the modernists' position concerning the explanation of religious phenomenon is. This underscores the fact that the type of rationality embedded in the Cartesian method should not be the monopoly of the modernists. It could even be turned against them, if it is utilised objectively. Thus, Bennabi reclaimed the Cartesian method as a means of producing a favourable epistemology that looks into religion in a totally different and positive light. It is an epistemology that would never exclude religion but rather could be carefully applied to open space for a more learned and objective discourse on religion.

Conclusion

The essence of Bennabi's comparison, it should be emphasised, was about textual strategy, narrative and meta-narrative. It was less focused on inter-textual relationship between the Bible and the Qur'ān, and concerned itself mainly with providing an explanation of the striking similarities. Bennabi's choice to reconstruct the story of Joseph in order to answer the main question of meta-narrative, i.e. of how the story was retold in the Qur'ānic account, opened a new type of discourse in the understanding of the relationship between religion and modernity.

It should be equally highlighted that Bennabi's analysis of the religious phenomenon did not turn religion into an exclusive dogma. Rather it presented religious postulates emanating from monotheism as a learned choice of mapping the human reality. The positivistic approach would be one possible way of understanding the religious phenomenon, but, to his mind, it is highly unlikely. This is because it suffers from inherent problems, when applied to understanding of religious issues. Thus, in understanding the religious phenomenon as such, a learned choice had to be made between two competing methodological and philosophical stands. Both seem to have emerged from the Cartesian mode of analysis.[39]

Clearly, the story of Joseph which was an outcome of a learned textual strategy, is in fact a twofold story of one end-to-end narrative of Prophethood and human emotions: the story of Jacob, a loving father watching through difficult years of famine and uncertainty the realisation of his son's dream with all hopes in God's promise in whose power he had full trust; and the story of Joseph, who, when

his adopted mother and father, the aristocratic ladies in the city and those in power were arrayed against him, managed to be victorious over all by perseverance, resolute will and firm belief in God's promise. Finally, he came to the moment of declaring the realisation of his dream that turned a beginning-to-end narrative into an end-to-end one in the Qur'ānic account, whereas it seems fairly certain that the Biblical narrative has it as a beginning-to-end narrative. In the story of Jacob's family, this developed to encompass Joseph's story and beyond. In sum, Bennabi's comparative strategy transformed the basic structure of the story of Joseph into an end-to-end narrative. Therefore, the comparison became possible because of this learned decision of making something out of the striking similarities. One can argue that Bennabi's originality is less in merely using the Cartesian method than in perceiving its importance in challenging modernity itself by its own means.

Notes

1. Bennabi's work on the Qur'ān, originally written in French, was first published in 1947 under the title *Le Phénomène Coranique: essai d'une théorie sur le Coran*. In 1959, its Arabic translation by Abdul Ṣabūr Shāhīn under the supervision of Ibrahim Zein was published from Cairo entitled *Al-Ẓāhirah al-Qur'āniyyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1981). For the English translation of the book see Malik Bennabi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon*, tr. A.B. Kirkary (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1983). Another fully annotated and documented translation is Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon: An Essay of a Theory on the Qur'ān* (KL: Islamic Book Trust, 2001).

2. There exist a number of studies comparing Biblical narratives with the Qur'ānic ones. See for example, John Kaltner, *Inquiring of Joseph: Getting to Know a Biblical Character Through the Qur'ān* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003). The author apparently is not well informed about the Qur'ānic narrative. Nora Syed Iqbal Zaheer, "The Story of Yūsuf in the Qur'ān and the Bible: A Comparative Analytical Study" (Master's Thesis, IIUM, 2004).

3. The story of Prophet Joseph (Yūsuf in Arabic) is the most detailed narrative in the Qur'ān, and bears some resemblance to the Biblical counterpart. The substance of the story is that as a boy, Joseph was the victim of a plot by his brothers who threw him into a well hoping that he would be picked up by a caravan as a captive. Later, he was sold into the slave market in Egypt, where

he was bought for a nominal sum. Then he fell victim to the attempted seduction by a great man's wife who, when her wish was foiled, sent him to prison, where he remained for some time. Given his ability to interpret dreams, he came close to the Egyptian King and became his Minister. He then began his call to Allah from the position of ruling authority. Allah's plans were carried out, Joseph was reunited with his family and the matter ended. The story is presented in a sequence of episodes and the transition is inspiring and informative.

4. Bennabi has mentioned this in the book's introduction (p. 1). See also the corresponding translator's note Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon: An Essay of a Theory on the Qur'ān.*

5. Malik Bennabi: *Mudhakkirāt Shāhid lil-Qar'ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1404/1984), 208-213.

6. Dr. El-Tahir El-Mesawi, in a scholarly discussion with the author, expressed a different opinion on this issue especially on the very definition of the text. I considered the translated version of the text as a new representation; Dr. El-Mesawi simply ignored that element. Translation, in my opinion, is essentially an act of interpretation.

7. Bennabi: *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon*, 1.

8. Ibid.

9. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n. d.), 116-125.

10. Ṭāhā Ḥussain: *Fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1996). See also Abū Yaʿrub al-Marzūqī: *Fī al-ʿAlāqah Bayna al-Shiʿr al-Muṭlaq wa al-Iʿjāz al-Qur'ānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalīʿāh, 2000).

11. Ṭāhā Ḥussain anticipated the controversy his book, published in 1926, would create. Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq al-Rāfiʿī contributed a number of learned as well as sensational articles to refute Ṭāhā Ḥussain's claims. al-Rāfiʿī, Muṣṭafā Ṣādiq: *Taḥta Rāyat al-Qurʿān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 2001). See also ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī in his *Dirāsāt al-Mustashriqīn Ḥawla Ṣiḥat al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm lil Malāyīn, 1986); Al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Khiḍir Ḥasanayn: *Naqd Kitāb al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azhariyyah li al-Turāth); al-Asad, Nāsir al-Dīn: *Maṣādir al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī wa Qīmatuhā al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 6th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1982), and *Nash'at al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī wa Taṭawwuruhū*: *Dirāsah fī al-Manhaj* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-ʿArabiyyah li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 1999). The issue of *iʿjāz* and its relationship with the controversy of *al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī* gave rise to a new controversy concerning the historicity of the Qur'ānic stories. See Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allah: *al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjulū al-Miṣriyyah, 1972).

12. Malik Bennabi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon: an Essay of a Theory on the Qur'ān,* trans. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2004), 5.

13. Malik Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*, tr. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2003); Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, *A Muslim Theory of Human Society*: *An Investigation into Sociological Thought of Malik Bennabi* (Batu Caves/Selangor: Thinker's Library, 1998); Fawzia Bariun, *Malik Bennabi: His life and Theory of Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1993); Bin al-Hassan, Badrān, *al-Ẓāhirah al-Gharbiyyah fī al-Waʿy al-Ḥaḍārī*: *ʿUnmūdhaj Malik Bennabi* (Doha: Kitāb al-Ummah, 2000).

14. Sayyid Quṭb, *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1980) and *Mashāhid al-Qiyāmah fī al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983). According to ʿAbdul Fattaḥ al-Khālidī, these two books were first published in 1945 and 1947 respectively. See al-Khālidī: *Sayyid Quṭb* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2000), 365-379.

15. Bennabi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon*, 215. See Aristotle, *De Poetica* (Poetics), tr. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1455-1487.

16. Bennabi: *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon,* 215.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 215–216.

19. Ibid., 216.

20. Ibid., 215-231.

21. Ibid., 5.

22. Muḥammad Miftāḥ, *al-Talaqqī wa al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1994), 142-144.

23. Bennabi: *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon*, 7.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 7.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 12.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 13. See, Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Kuala Lumpur:

Islamic Book Trust, 1999), 70-78, especially his analysis of the meaning of *ayah, bayyinah, burhān* and *sulṭān*.

30. Bennabi, *The Qur'ānic Phenomenon,* 13-15.

31. Ibid., 16-17.

32. Ibid., 30.

33. Ibid., 221.

34. Ibid., 221-222.

35. Ibid., 224.

36. Ibid., 225.

37. Ibid., 226-227

38. Ibid., 230.

39. Bennabi has criticised the tendency to strip reality and existence from their depth and richness by submitting our understanding thereof to the Cartesian mode of rationality and, for that matter, to instrumental reason. See for example his *Fikrat al-Afrīqiyyah al-Āsiyāwiyyah*, tr. 'Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1402/1982).